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Tornadoes and other quarrels

Sandy Woodson

The University of Montana

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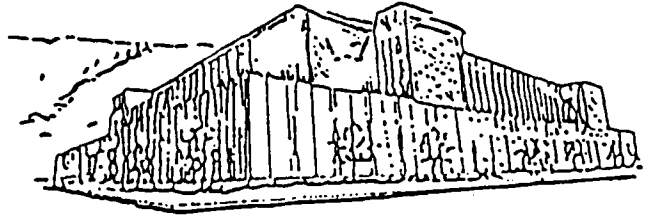
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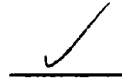
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TORNADOES AND OTHER QUARRELS

by

Sandy Woodson

B.A. North Carolina State University, 1991

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

1998

Approved by:


Chairperson


Dean, Graduate School

5-4-98

Date

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Thanks to Dee McNamer, Chris Offutt and Bill Kittredge for various moments of inspiration and encouragement. Thanks to my mother for her particular brand of ferocity. And to M.S.H. for believing in me all along.

for my father

Pray hard to weather, that lone surviving god,
that in some sudden wisdom we surrender.

--Richard Hugo

A Pure and Lively Flame

But on what grounds could one deny that these hands and this entire body are mine? Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to the insane, whose brains are impaired by such an unrelenting black vapor of black bile that they steadfastly insist that they are kings when they are utter paupers, or that they are arrayed in purple robes when they are naked, or that they have heads made of clay, or that they are gourds, or that they are made of glass.

-- Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*

I always imagine Descartes as something of a dandy. Foppish. He was not a morning person, and as a spoiled child he probably didn't have to be. He grew up with influential friends, and eventually gravitated toward royal women, most especially Christina, the young Queen of Sweden. Christina, in fact, contributed to his early demise: she demanded that Descartes instruct her in philosophy, and he reluctantly moved into Christina's dank and drafty castle. Sweden did not agree with him. "It seems to me that men's thoughts freeze here during winter, just as does the water," he said. He caught pneumonia. He suffered for a week and then died; he was 54.

As a young man he joined the army of Bavaria when

life in Paris became too much of a distraction: during the Thirty Years' War, armies only fought during summer, and life in winter quarters provided him the relative peace and quiet he needed for his work. When he was 23, he had a series of dreams about finding the basis for all knowledge, and he took those dreams as a sign; he left the army to complete his first book, *Discourse on Method*. Twenty-five years later he published the *Meditations*, and in between, he came up with analytic geometry.

Much of Descartes' work was an attempt to keep the (Catholic) Church and Science away from each others' throats. His solution was mind/body dualism: the mind is the essence of a person, his spirit, eternal; the body is a machine, merely a spirit-inhabited substance. He divided the territory--the Church got the mind, Science got the body, and never the twain shall meet. Which illustrates the problem: how, exactly, could a non-material spirit mingle with and influence material substance?

By Descartes' definition, the mind is a ghost, misty and floating, able to seep through walls and unable to move physical objects. Spirit then, it seems obvious, could never effect material substances in any way. But Descartes argued that spirit and body come together in the pineal gland, come together through pure and lively flames, flitting and

cavorting in the center of our brains. The pineal gland as the seat of the soul.

Plato laid the groundwork for Descartes, and all of Plato's talk about Pure Reason resides with us still: mathematical truths are eternal and available to us only through reason. Eternal truths, the Forms, come to us through pure rationality. Senses, the argument goes, deceive; the body deceives; the mind provides our only access to the eternal, the Real. And Plato thought we are all born with all knowledge about everything, we just need a reminder now and again. Plato thought that when we saw truth, we would recognize it.



Right around spring in fourth grade, my mother took me to get glasses. Rigid in the huge vinyl chair, I thrust my chin forward and let it drop into the cool cup, that plastic device which held my head in place. As the ophthalmologist flipped lenses back and forth in front of each eye, I struggled to concentrate, to think, look, make sure that first one really was better than the second. "I can't tell," I sometimes mumbled, and the doctor responded with a small grunt, impatiently flipping back and forth, back and forth. Finally, in embarrassment and frustration, I just picked one, and the process started all over again.

Two weeks later my mother and I went back to pick up my glasses. They were heavy and felt weird on my face; their weight seemed to pull the bridge of my nose back toward my molars. My eyes kept traveling toward the part of the rims where my virtually perfect vision ended, my eyeballs worrying those edges just like my tongue finding a hole where a tooth used to be.

When we walked outside the Wasatch Mountains leapt in front of my face and my jaw dropped. There was snow on those mountains, way up on the tallest peaks. Edges sharpened: I saw precisely where the parking lot ended and the road began, smudges of dirt on my tennis shoes, pebbles, telephone lines. This is what the world looks like. I had no idea.



I remember the shame of a woman who took Prozac. She said she felt like a giant letter "P" was emblazoned on her chest, ashamed she couldn't handle her pain on her own. She cried very quietly, her thick mascara glopping up to her eyebrows and down her cheeks. She worried about a man she had met, worried that when he found out she took Prozac, he'd think she was crazy. Our counselor consoled her with, "Well, he doesn't have to see your whole resume right off the bat." She nodded and hiccupped.

My best friend takes Prozac too, but I don't think he's particularly ashamed. It's like a vitamin for him; it restores some balance. He says he likes that it makes him less introspective and more productive. He tells me about how much energy he has. I squirm a bit when he describes all of this: he's like a missionary sitting in my living room, glowing and earnest. "No, I haven't been saved," I want to say. "And truth be told, I don't really want to give myself over to God." I'd shrug, "Sorry."

I fiddled and fooled with a couple of therapists when I was twenty or so, working on "career options" and "time management." I made pie charts of my days, cut out pictures in magazines and made collages of who I wanted to be. One of those therapists was a woman who held my hand while I had an abortion. Victoria. I could never quite seem to get over my embarrassment at squeezing her hand so hard during the D & C that her thumb turned blue. I remember the conversation we had while I was on the table: her brother was bartender in Orlando, and boy is that hard work. I remember that better than anything we said in her office. That and her blue thumb.

When I was twenty-three, I started thinking I was crazy, probably crazy enough to be put away. This had nothing to do with the abortion.

There were days I couldn't decide on a laundromat. I'd pull my car into parking lots and quickly glance into windows, hoping for rows of raised lids and no people. I didn't want anyone watching me carry my clothes, seeing my back with its bulge of fat over my bra. They'd think, "Fat cow." I didn't want anyone watching my underwear whirling around the dryer. Possible stains. Something too intimate about people seeing my clothes, my exposed back. So I drove around town looking in windows, shaking my head, unable to go inside.

I quit going to school; nothing I read seemed very important. My apartment started giving me the creeps: someone had stuck precisely lined rows of masking tape across all the windows, some bizarre attempt at blinds, and the spaces between the rows were no more than half an inch. I kept trying to see between those lines, my fingernails making little crescents in the tape. Backing away from the glass, I'd go to the bathroom and vomit. It's just that the world seemed composed of surfaces, flat and opaque and tinged with the grey of primer. Fingers poked me from my insides, their nails piercing the tender lining of my stomach. My belly was green wood, the bark pulling away like a hang nail. Snap. Crack. Rip.

Back then, I figured a "professional" might recognize

my sadness, but with all those intrusive questions, she might unknowingly thrust her fingers into the wrong place and send me completely over the edge. That professional, filled with good intentions, might ask the wrong question, and I'd start crying, and that would be it. A professional would recognize madness when she saw it.

Back then, I wanted a Pill. It seemed so much safer--easier--than exposing myself to the danger of a complete breakdown. But that meant finding a therapist who would both prescribe it for me and do so without too much prying.

"There's nothing physiologically wrong with you," my new therapist told me, calmly flipping through the results from my physical.

I sat there, on the nubby, slate-blue couch, rubbing my forehead, blowing air out between my lips. "So I guess that means no pills?"

She shook her head.

"Well, shit."

I ended up sitting on that couch once or twice a week for the next six years. We created no pie charts or collages. She also didn't ask the wrong question, the mysterious question with the power to send me over the edge. A couple times I did have to lay down, hang my head over the front edge of the cushions, and will myself out of throwing

up. In those six years anti-depressants were never discussed again. And I admit to a certain smugness: I was brave enough and strong enough to get through depression the hard way. I was a Tough Guy.

The first time Prozac was offered to me I was in graduate school studying philosophy. I went to the student health center to see about some Nicorette and talked to some woman for about ten minutes. I told her about my past attempts to quit, admitting that when I tried to quit I usually ended up thinking, "I don't care if it does kill me. Life is not worth living without cigarettes." Which ended with a trip down to the corner store for a pack of smokes.

"You know," she said, "Prozac might help you out with the anxiety, enabling you to handle the stress of quitting."

"Uh. Mmm," I grimaced, "I'm not depressed right now. Sometimes I get depressed *after* I quit. So I'm not sure...but I'll think about it. Thanks."

No way. Didn't use it then, not going to use it now.

A year or so later, I started seeing a new therapist, and within two weeks, she also suggested Prozac. I remember thinking, "What is **with** you people? I have indigestion too. How 'bout some Prozac?" I remember shaking my head in disgust and disbelief.

I admitted to this therapist that I had trouble

sleeping and focusing on my thesis. My father was ill-- Alzheimer's. Very sad. Yes, I'd say stressful. And my last boyfriend committed suicide about six months ago. We weren't together at the time; he was in law school and actually had a new girlfriend by then. It's just that I miss him. But we weren't engaged or anything. I'm not so sure I'm very good at philosophy, actually.

But I wondered if that meant I needed to alter my brain chemistry. Seems pretty clear to me I had some good reasons to be sad. And I spent six years, not to mention thousands of dollars, learning to recognize and respond to my feelings. And they wanted me to *blunt* those feelings? I don't think so.

But the idea kept nibbling at me. That old attraction of taking a pill and feeling all better captured my imagination again. And there was a new element: I read about the transformations, stories about how some people don't just get over the depression, their personalities change, *they* change. Wallflowers emerging as Prom Queens. The meek taking over Fortune 500 companies.

I began to fantasize about the New Me. I'll be razor-thin, a svelte sex-goddess. I'll be able to wear fabulous clothes, clothes that hug every curve, with the skirts way up on my thighs. I'll fall in love; I'll talk in class. My

confidence will overflow, and that thesis will be cake to write, and I could be the first tenured female philosopher on faculty at Harvard. Of course, then I could quit smoking. I'll definitely stop procrastinating. Maybe I'll even be patient enough to sit in the sun and get a tan.

Then Descartes and Plato started a litany in my head: "Your brain is your identity. This isn't like taking an aspirin. This changes who you are."

This may be a moot point, I told myself. She may never suggest Prozac again. So how about this: if it comes up in therapy again, don't dismiss it. She may never mention it again, and if she doesn't, well, fine. If she does, then take it from there. Just wait and see.

When she did mention it again, visions of the New, sexy, skinny, non-smoking, Harvard-teaching Me floated around my skull. I'm ashamed to say I allowed images of beauty and Harvard to bully old Descartes into a muttering heap.



At the age when Descartes was in the Bavarian army dreaming about his deductive system, I was working in a pizza place in South Carolina. On my way home one night, a drunk lost control of his Corvette, and my face went through the windshield of a '77 Toyota. My forehead, chin and upper

lip got pretty scraped up, and the tip of my nose hung by a little flap of skin. Months later, dragging your finger across my nose or forehead was like stroking a closed zipper.

"Fix it," I thought, and that's all I thought. Didn't hesitate. Nor did I complain when the plastic surgeon got done with my nose and it looked straighter and narrower, almost thin. It's still a little numb at the tip, and prone to sunburn, but all in all, not bad.

I would never have had plastic surgery if my face hadn't gone through that windshield. I would have continued thinking that the little bulb at the end of my nose was somehow charming.



I sit in the psychiatrist's office, trying to appear relaxed and attentive. I know I must pass this man's test to get Prozac. Yes, members of my family have used antidepressants before, but not Prozac. My mother, father, and both of my sisters. My Mom has for years and years. Well, I'm having trouble sleeping, getting to sleep. I'm kind of tired all the time because I'm not sleeping well. Yes, I'd say I'm anxious. There's a lot going on--my father is ill, I'm trying to write my thesis, I've been very sad about a friend's death. Yes, I'm seeing someone at the

counseling center.

He starts flipping pages on a giant tablet of paper hanging on an easel, looking for the diagram that explains how Prozac works.

I'm in.

"This is your brain," he says, pointing to the top of the page. "These are neurons," he motions with his pen, pointing at a spot on the page that looks like a barren tree in winter. This is your brain on Prozac. Just say no. Stop the madness.

I jiggle my knee as I wait for the pharmacist to fill my prescription. I don't know what to say when she asks about sending the bill to my insurance company. My mind casts back to a nurse practitioner telling me that if I show an AIDS test in my records, I'll never get insurance again. Doesn't matter if it comes out negative, the insurance company thinks that you think you could have AIDS. Is depression like AIDS? Will I have a big letter "P" in my records? I think I'll pass on the insurance. Out in my car, I shake the bottle only half full of little green and beige capsules, one month, fifty dollars' worth. I read the list of possible side-effects: nausea; excessive energy, headaches, sexual dysfunction. Jesus. Take one every morning with food. Avoid dairy products. Okay.

I call my two closest friends and command them to keep an eye on me. If I turn into the Bluebird of Happiness or the Stepford Graduate Student, notify me immediately. I may lose touch with myself. I may act strangely and not know it. I'm messing with my brain here. It has something to do with serotonin uptake and neurons. I'm not really sure. It will probably take three weeks to kick in, but some people experience change in a matter of days. Sure I'm nervous. Hopefully it will be worth all this. Just let me know.

Days pass, and I vigilantly watch for my reactions. Nausea? Yes, definitely. Headaches? Some, but no worse than before. Loss of libido? Not that I can tell. Maybe I look different. I critically examine myself in a mirror. Like the day after I slept with someone for the first time, I was sure that you could look at me and tell the difference--surely my eyes were greener or something. But no, same old face.

The only thing that really seemed to change was sleeping--I slept and I slept hard. Such relief to go to bed and simply fall asleep. The hours of clock-watching were replaced with quick oblivion. And waking up was radically different. Usually I wake up a little furred: I hug my head, bury my face in pillows, sometimes hum an abbreviated scale. I scissor my legs against flannel sheets, floating; language

is completely out of the question. But with Prozac, my eyes opened and I was fully awake. No lolling around in my bed vaguely contemplating the ceiling, just up, up, up.

Apparently, transformation is not in my chemical cards. Weeks passed, and my thesis didn't seem any easier to write. Mountain Dew and barbeque chips retained their awful allure, and my body kept up its demand for nicotine. Eloquence and elegance eluded me, as always. After five months, the nausea sharpened; it began to make falling to sleep a horrible process again. Every night I sat up in bed, nibbling Saltines and sipping flat Coke. Again I anxiously watched the blue iridescent numbers on my clock.

So I decided to stop taking Prozac; it seemed silly to mess with my brain chemistry for no good reason. Part of me still wanted that transformation, but I admit I'm relieved it didn't come: I don't know what I would choose if I had to decide between some nausea and the New Me.



Sometimes, I think Descartes was right about the mind and body being totally different; anyone who has watched me when I try to ski can attest to the fact that there seems to be absolutely no connection between my mind and my body. I nod my head when I read Descartes' arguments about how different the mind and body are: you cut off my hand and I

remain. But cut into my brain, and I alter, irrevocably and completely. So Descartes got what he wanted; he kept the Soul out of Science's reach, kept the Self immutable and eternal. Which is, of course, what we all want.

I know you can see more clearly with contact lenses than with glasses; I wore them when I was younger. You can play better tennis without glasses flying off your face or sliding down your nose. Contacts don't steam up when you come inside from a frigid winter day, or get speckled by raindrops. And now I can have an operation to flatten my corneas, and get all the advantages of contact lenses, permanently. Perhaps I'd be more attractive, permanently. But I don't think I'll have that operation. I like being able to take off my glasses, put them back on again, the different ways I see the world. I like the minutes of softness before I reach for the clarity of day.

Short Gap

I sleep lightly in my parents' house. I listen, always.

Back in the four-poster bed my parents shared for decades, I hear the doorknob to my father's bedroom shift. Quickly, not even closing the book I'm reading, I snap off the lamp. I'm afraid the light around the door frame will attract him; perhaps darkness will repel him. I watch for the shadows feet cast beneath a door. I hear water hitting the red oak floor in the hall. *Mom, I pray, please wake up.*

He's peeing on the floor. I don't exactly know how I identify this sound so certainly, but I do. I look wildly around the darkened room. *Come on, Mom.* I do not want to open my bedroom door. This is simply something I do not want to see, but he's peeing in the hall, about three feet from my mother's head, and it's obvious at this point that she's not going to wake up. I'm a grown person, I tell myself. I've seen a penis before; it's no big deal.

As I step from my room into the dimly lit hall, my father turns to face me. He's naked from the waist down, and

his white T-shirt is bunched around the arms. His dark eyes look into mine, and I see horror, maybe shame, an instant of recognition. He quickly covers himself with cupped hands. I am shocked by how pale he is.

"Come on Dad, let's go on back to bed," I say, trying to maneuver myself behind him. He stands there, turns to look at me: he doesn't know where to go.

"Come on, Papa Bear--this way." Obediently, mutely, he takes my hand and follows me back to his room.

"You just sit down right there," I say, patting the bed. "Put your feet under the covers. There you go. All snug. I'll see you in the morning Papa. You have sweet dreams."

Closing his door, I pray he'll sleep through the rest of the night. As I crouch down, wipe up the floor, I also pray he doesn't remember any of this, that his recognition of me was as fleeting as it appeared. Returning to my parents' bed, I glance in the dresser mirror. I am as pale as he was. I cannot sleep nude here, as I normally do. I must be ready.



Of course he was back up later that night, wandering through the house, an old man in stocking feet rearranging chairs and hiding things. He cannot sleep for more than

three or four hours at a time--it's the Alzheimers. At some point night and day, time and time's passage became meaningless for him. Mercifully, my mother sleeps through it all. Two hundred milligrams of antidepressants ensure that she does not lie awake listening for the doorknobs rattling, for creaking floorboards.

Every night during his wanderings, my father discovers my mother's sleeping form, and squeezes himself into the twin bed with her. Just past dawn, she finally wakes, eases herself out of the bed. Pattering down the hall in a flannel nightgown, she unlocks the poorly hidden latches that keep the outside doors firmly closed; she fixes my father his oatmeal and hot tea, poking his pills into applesauce.

"Don't you know the Ted Williams story?" she asks me later that morning, peering out of a kitchen window. She moves to another window, trying to spot my father. He's out back, splitting wood in monstrously even strokes. I shake my head at his precision, the shirt pulling tight across his muscular back as the axe plunges through a chunk of wood.

"Well," she exhales, turning to me and lighting another cigarette, "you know who Ted Williams is, don't you? In the locker room after some game, they're taking a shower. And Ted Williams turns to your Dad and says, 'Woodson, you've got the ugliest pecker I've ever seen.'"

She grins and draws deep on her cigarette. Grinning myself, I can't decide which is more outrageous--the fact that Ted Williams was talking about my father's penis, or that the word "pecker" came out of my mother's mouth.

"All those old ball players used to send us tickets for the World Series when we first got married." Sighing, looking back out the window, she adds, "It's a shame you never got to really know your Dad."



It's hard for me to imagine the man who played ball with Ted Williams, the darkly handsome gunnery officer in World War Two, the man who built this house in 1954. The Woody Woodson of my experience was a man to be avoided. In 1962, when I was born, he was 44, on his third wife, and filled with rage. Only his age changed.

On my more charitable days, I decide that he really loved us, but he had some sort of birth defect: no sensation in his hands. His nerves stopped at the wrist. He couldn't have known how strong he was, the pain of his touch. I make excuses for him still: last year I stood in this kitchen and helplessly watched him tense his shoulder and raise his arm in preparation for a swift backhand to my face. Standing there, once again paralyzed and bewildered by my father's anger, I looked at his fist and chose to believe that this

was the disease acting, not him. His arm never completed its arc; instead he slowly turned his head and looked at me over his shoulder, grinning, a hulking coquette.

The center of my father's existence was never me, or my brother and sisters, or his wife, or his job. His life revolved around this house, this part of the world. Part of me approves of his obsession: Short Gap, West Virginia is an honest place. Stone cottages line rutted gravel roads, and the worn mountains of the Appalachians wrap you in delicate security. The valley is broad, lying mostly in the shadow of maple trees. Stars are crisp, and at night, sound travels as if over snow.

Not so many years ago Dad would point out particularly elegant traits he designed and built into this house. Those red oak floors with matching four-inch moldings. Big closets in each of the three, boxy, bedrooms. Walking through the basement he'd slap a board overhead and announce, "4x4's, not 2x4's. I built this place *right*." He'd purse his lips.

"Twelve inches of insulation," he'd nod, gazing appreciatively around.

He cut the stone that forms the chimney and mantle, porch and exterior of the house. He drove his truck up to Garrett County, Maryland, and hauled exposed sandstone boulders out of a field. I imagine him, sweaty and

squinting, carefully chipping each glittering rock into squares and rectangles, patiently molding the rose and grey stone to his liking.



Mom glances at the kitchen clock. "Shit. It's one o'clock. He needs to stop--he doesn't know when to stop anymore."

She hurries out on the porch and calls Dad away from his wood. I hear her talking; I can't make out more than "splitting maul" and "later." She's using that tone of voice, that soothing falsetto mothers use with their children, and I realize she once used that tone with me.

"Come on in the kitchen with me," she says, leading him by the hand. "We'll get some lunch, and you can take a break."

"Where's Carolyn?" he demands. He jerks his hand away, stands rigid in the middle of the floor.

Mom stops and turns, "That's me honey; *I'm* Carolyn, your wife. And this is Sandy, our daughter. She's here for a visit from Colorado."

His jaw clenched, he stares at her. He shakes his head no, then drops his eyes to the linoleum. Slumping, he shakes his head again. Mom moves to hug him, pressing her ear to his jaw. She looks up, motions with her hand, draws me into

their arms.

"Colorado's far away," he murmurs in my ear.

I sigh, "Yes, Papa Bear, it is."

Mom gently pulls away from the embrace. Dad's quietly weeping, his broad back hunched.

"He needs his pills," she tells me as she takes his hand and pats it, looking into his face. She rests her hand lightly on his forehead, checking for fever.

"Well then," I say, "let's have some lunch and get Dad his pills."

As I heat up some Campbell's chicken noodle, she rummages in the kitchen cabinet, gathering his midday medicine: two Ergoloid, two buspar, one perpherzine and one amitriptyline. These are all big-time drugs, drugs that alter brain chemistry. Buspar is an anti-anxiety medication, perpherzine an anti-psychotic, amitriptyline an antidepressant. Ergoloid (a generic brand of hydrogene) is an experimental Alzheimer's drug.

"It's incredibly expensive, and the doctors keep trying to get me to stop using it," Mom tells me. "But I'm here and I see the difference it makes. If he doesn't have it, he gets all weepy and nervous, really out of it."

Armed with a glass of water and the pills, she approaches Dad. He's sitting at the kitchen table, eyes wide

and watering.

Mom says, popping a pill in his mouth, "Here Woody. Let me get you a straw. Put it on the back of your tongue and take a big slug of water."

"Can't do it," Dad moans, the pill floating around his mouth. "Okay," Mom says, "spit it back out. We'll just get some applesauce."

Mom grabs open the refrigerator door, pulls out the applesauce. Filling a spoon with pills and the sauce, she commands, "Open up."

He presses his lips together, shakes his head. "Can't do it," he repeats.

The soothing falsetto evaporates. "Now Woody, open your mouth and take these pills." I'm standing at the stove, mechanically stirring soup, glancing at them over my shoulder. Dad looks miserable and defiant.

"I mean it Woody. Take the pills."

He glares at her, presses his lips together even tighter. Mom's chin lowers, she looks him straight in the eye, stands perfectly still. The spoon is suspended between them.

I feel him staring at my back. I am thankful my mother has hidden all but two of the knives. One of them is in the drawer next to my hip, the other in my hand. I slice

tomatoes with it.

The soup starts to boil and I take it off the burner. I am careful not to make too much noise, to do nothing that might break my mother's concentration. Again I glance over my shoulder.

Sneering and sullen, he finally opens his mouth. She quickly slips the spoon in, backs away.

"There you go, Woody honey. In twenty minutes, you'll feel better."

She joins me at the counter, asks me whether I want Miracle Whip on my sandwich, acts like nothing is wrong. But I listen for the scrape of the kitchen chair on the floor, the sound of his heavy shoes. I hold onto the knife.

Turning to the stove, I pretend to stretch, take a look at him. I avoid looking at his face, his eyes.

But he's staring at his hands. They're resting, palms up, on his thighs. He starts, catches me looking at him.

"So Papa Bear, you ready for some lunch?"

He stares at me, but not with hatred. He's lost who I am again.

"That is amazing," I whisper to Mom, nodding at Dad. He's eating a sandwich, content to look out the window at cardinals darting in and out of the bird feeder.

"I know," she says. "I just *had* to get those pills in

him." She takes a deep breath. "Without them, I couldn't take care of him--I couldn't manage him. He'd have to go away."

My mother impatiently shakes off any suggestion of a nursing home: "It's not time yet. I'll know when it's time." I don't think she can stand the thought of his walking out of this house, trusting her, trailing behind her outstretched hand, and never returning. She cannot stand the thought of other people brushing his teeth, or imagine that a stranger would care if his shirt is tucked in. I'm sure another part of her hesitation is money--Alzheimer's care is expensive. She'd lose the house, probably.

"I'm so tired, I just don't know if I'm making good decisions anymore," she tells me, and I don't know whether she is or not. She has aged 15 years in the last five--at 61, she's fourteen years younger than my father, but looks his contemporary. She has gained probably 20 pounds, and is up to almost three packs of cigarettes a day. I try to tell her that it won't do Dad any good if she kills herself taking care of him. If she has a heart attack, he's going into a home--none of us kids can handle him.

"I know, I know," she says. "I don't even remember when things were normal anymore," she says, trying to explain.



After lunch, Dad dozes in his chair in the living room, his eyes half open. Mom sips her coffee and works the crossword puzzle in the newspaper. I sit enthralled by their huge TV, flipping through channels with the remote. I am absolutely enamored of The Weather Channel; I can watch it for hours. I smile, imagine my friends in Chicago walking out of their apartments and looking up at cloudy skies, or my sister in Georgia driving down the road with windshield wipers thudding.

My parents watch a lot of the Discovery Channel. Dad gets upset at other stations because he thinks the people on TV are actually in the room. Or he's with them, inside the screen. There's a murder on the news, a screaming argument, a seduction in a bathroom, and all of the saliva and blood is on his living room floor. He gets scared because he thinks he's supposed to be on the field playing ball, but he's too tired; he doesn't want to play anymore. But for some reason, he can watch lions and shrews shred their prey to bits. I can't tell if he knows that they're far away, or if he is simply unafraid.

Every once in a while he watches a baseball game and enjoys it. Before the wives and the house and the kids, his dreams revolved around baseball. At 19, he was offered a contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers' farm team. Because he

was a minor, he needed his parents' permission to go, but they refused to sign the contract: he was needed on the farm. So my father forged his father's signature. And when his clumsy forgery was discovered, the Dodgers sent him home.

Several years later, when Dad's father first saw him pitch a game, his father said, "If I'd known you were that good, I'd have let you go."

"I'll always wonder what my life would have been like if I could've stayed," Dad once told me, his eyes avoiding mine, "but I don't know how good I really was."

My father built this house for his second wife, Jean. Jean was, by all accounts, a beauty. Shawnee hair and cheekbones mark my half-sister as her child. Jean also slept around. While her husband, my father, worked in underground bunkers testing experimental propellants, she brought men to the house, this house. In a town the size of Short Gap, such things are noticed. Jean, apparently, was also not so very bright. They divorced in 1958.

In May 1965, in Ridgeley, over on the other side of the Knobbly Mountains, my (half) sister Judy came home from school, found and followed a path of destruction eventually ending in the upstairs bathroom. Judy found her mother's battered corpse in the bathtub. Jean had drowned, finally,

but not before she was bludgeoned, stabbed and then strangled with the cord used to close the drapes at night.

While the police milled around our house, looking for evidence and checking the knives in our kitchen drawers, my father barked, "If I didn't kill the bitch while I was married to her, I sure as hell wouldn't do it now."

I imagine this is true. But Jean's killer was never found.

Judy, a weekend visitor, came to live with us full time. She, of course, was a mess. Since no one knew who had committed this crime, my mother was afraid whoever did it would come after Judy, and by extension, us. When my father went to his underground bunkers in the morning, my mother closed all the windows and drapes, locked all the doors, and gathered the children together in the living room. It was hot, I remember that. My sisters sat cross-legged doing homework; sometimes they silently played Monopoly.

I imagine my mother listening for every sound, for cars crunching down the road and barking dogs. She eyed the loaded shotguns standing by every door and consoled herself with the knowledge that she had been on the Rifle Team in high school. Every day we waited in the still and sweltering house for my father to come home.

Rumor circulated that Judy's stepfather had killed

Jean, and paid off the police to botch the case--somehow, the house was cleaned before anyone collected evidence. Judy's stepfather started driving past her school in his big, black car. He buzzed our house with his airplane.

Dad asked for, and got, a transfer. We left Short Gap in 1966; I was 4 years old. My parents rented out this house for 17 years, moving back, finally, when my father retired.

There was never any doubt they would retire here; my father had a homing device for Short Gap. Neither the bad memories, nor the fact that my mother didn't want to come back mattered, ultimately. For him, the important things remained: the hunting on Parker Mountain is still good, and the pond at the farm is stocked with bass. A small creek runs next to the garden. The house is paid for, and that's nothing to sneeze at. The pear and apple trees still produce, and it's time to start planting maple trees to mark the birth of each grandchild. Just as he did when each of his children was born.



Dad dozes until dinner, and dinner itself is remarkably uneventful. Afterward, we all shamle back into the living room, letting our food settle. Dividing my attention between the Weather Channel and a Speigel catalog, I occasionally angle the book to show my mother an Oriental rug or silk

suit. Dad falls back into a fitful sleep, lulled by the monotones of cold fronts and isobars.

Suddenly, he's up out of the chair and heading for the front door.

"Where you going Woody?" Mom carefully calls.

"Home," he growls.

She scrambles up off the couch, trying to beat him to the door. I stand, uncertain, the catalog slipping out of my hands and onto the floor.

He's at the front door, his hand on the knob. Mom stops a couple of feet from his back, tries the soothing voice: "Wait a minute honey. You are home. This is your house. You built this house. Look at the chimney--don't you recognize that stone?"

Mom doesn't touch him; he's too angry now. She backs away slowly, trying to get him to follow her into the living room. He cocks his head, suspicious.

"Yeah Papa, you built this *beautiful* little house," I chime in, trying to match her tone. I move to her side, try to appear large, but I'm afraid to meet his eye.

He glares first at Mom, then at me. He's not convinced. He doesn't recognize anything here.

I plan what I'll do if he walks out the door: I'll follow him, and if he heads toward the highway, I'll

probably have to tackle him. Or try to tackle him. He's still strong.

If he takes a swing at Mom, she probably wouldn't even try to get out of the way. She wouldn't believe her eyes. But if he hurt her, he'd damn well go into a nursing home.

I breathe, watch Mom out of the corner of my eye.

She tries a new tactic: "Woody. I'll take you wherever you want to go tomorrow. But look outside--it's dark and cold. It's too late to go anywhere tonight. Why don't you stay here, all warm and snug?"

He's not happy, but he wavers, his momentum slipping away.

Trying to distract him further, Mom says, "How about a dish of ice cream?"

She turns her back to him, starts moving toward the kitchen, and it seems to work: as his eyes follow her, the hostility dims.

"Mom" I say. She stops and turns. "How about I get us all some ice cream?" I shake my head, look at Dad: Don't leave me alone with him. She nods.

When I return, they're sitting side-by-side on the couch, holding hands.

"Thank you honey," Dad smiles lovingly as he accepts the bowl. "You're a good kid."

I almost fall over.



Long after they have gone to bed, I sit on the couch, leafing through a magazine.

I listen for movement, for creaking floors and mattresses, but the only sounds are my mother's unconscious murmurings. I wonder what is going on over in his room, and I imagine him lying rigid on his back, staring at the ceiling. I imagine him too scared to move, and trying to be brave, his eyes jerking, following shadows. He tries to touch the light rustling above his head, his old hand floating, shaking, touching nothing.

Coming Down

Wedged in the coat closet with my back against a wall, I patted along the overhead shelf feeling for square cardboard boxes of shotgun shells, and pulled down four. I gingerly lowered the flimsy boxes into a worn paper grocery bag, trying to be quiet. Hangers bowing, I squeezed the pockets of my father's down vests and coats, found a half-dozen individual shells, and dropped them into my bag. I leaned back against the coats so the bulb overhead could shine into the corners, and sighed when the light revealed only dust. Then I peeked around the door frame listening for my father's voice, grabbed my paper bag and casually walked downstairs to the basement. Be methodical, I thought, think where he would put them, where he would hide them from the people, he was convinced, who were stealing from him. Where would I hide something in this house? Maybe in some of the same places he did: the drawers of his workbench in the basement, out by the hoes and spare rubber tubing in the garage, behind the seat of his '74 Ford pick-up.

I saved the easiest for last: the gun cabinet sitting

in my mother's bedroom. He built it when I was 12 or so, gave it a cherry finish with beveled edges. I remember him sanding it by hand, caressing, his eyes never wavering. When he was done, the cabinet stood over six feet tall, taller even than he was. The display part sat on a two-drawer chest with brass handles, and it had six velvet-lined slots for the guns. My father reverently lined his guns up behind the glass; he carefully positioned a stuffed squirrel, posed clutching a walnut in its hands, to keep watch over them.

I looked at the guns, wondering if they were loaded. I moved the dusty squirrel so the door could swing out. The little magnet held tight, then click it released, the door wobbling. I picked up the Winchester by the barrel, held it at arm's length and shook my head at the strength of the man who lugged this heavy thing all over the hills of West Virginia. And then I set the rifle back into its velvet slot.

My father had never allowed me to touch his guns; I have only the vaguest idea of how they operate. When I was a kid I didn't even look at them, I was so afraid. I thought the force of my gaze might knock one over and it would go off, and I'd blast a hole in a wall and then plaster would pour down through mangled, blown wires. Or I believed my father had some superhuman power, and even if I was extra

careful, he would know I had touched one, like a mosquito disturbing the hair on his arms.

A couple of days before my mother had asked me to take all the bullets and shells out of the house. Alzheimer's was making my father paranoid, making him hallucinate. He talked to the news anchors on TV, nodding good-bye and smiling, agreeing to see them at eleven. He counted things, extending his finger, pointing to his pipes or cypress knees. He hid the remote control, his glasses, pocket knives, false teeth. Usually he hid things so well we never found them. When something came up missing, he knew someone was stealing from him. And then he returned to the father I've always known: his face would darken; thunderheads would gather.

My mother told me she was afraid he might commit suicide. There were moments when he'd be trying to talk, and he'd get that first bit of a sentence out there, "I believe that," or "You remember this," and end up shaking his head, losing the thought. "I'm just not thinking right anymore," he'd groan, and I'd pat his hand, start his sentence for him again, but it rarely worked. The thought had melted away, and he'd look down to the floor, terrified.

To me it seemed far more likely he would pick up a gun and shoot my mother, the often-stranger who kept telling him what to do, the woman making him take those pills, denying

him the car keys. He was like an angry three year old, pouting and petulant, unable to mask his desire to hurt the source of his frustration. I also heard about how the earlier memories are supposed to stay the longest. How Alzheimer's makes people violent. He knew how to shoot a gun when he was no more than six years old. Although she never admitted it, I bet she was afraid of him too.

Drawing pine boards over the table saw for that gun cabinet, my father ran the index finger of his left hand straight up the blade, cutting through his nail, ripping the flesh down to the bone. Blood splattered, flipping up off of the blade. Carefully cradling his hand, he turned to me and calmly said, "Go get your mother." I remember being mesmerized by his blood dripping onto the cement floor. "Sandydammit, go, get your mother."

When they got back from the hospital, my mother told me about how the doctors had cut and tweezed and stitched, but that Dad refused any drugs. He got a little pale, she said, but that was about it.

His bravery impressed me, then. But now I think it was indicative of something else, some birth defect: I think his hands were numb, the nerves stopped at the wrist. He couldn't have known how strong he was, the pain of his touch. I'm making excuses for him still. A couple of years

after I took the bullets from the house I stood in the kitchen and helplessly watched him tense his shoulder and raise his arm in preparation for a swift backhand to my face. I have no idea what set him off. Standing there, once again paralyzed and bewildered by the depth of my father's anger, I looked at his fist and chose to believe that this was the disease acting, not him. His arm never completed its arc; instead he slowly turned his head and looked at me over his shoulder, grinning, a hulking coquette.

My father was 42 when I was born, but he never seemed old: he played softball and split fire wood, his back and freckled arms bunched with muscle. He spent every Thanksgiving week hunting deer, returning home unshaven and grinning, smelling like blood and sinew. His brown eyes sparkled when he laughed. And his hands, those hands, were as strong and stubborn as green wood. They tickled too hard. But he pulled weeds like he loved them.

I used to lie in my bed, starting around the time he built the gun cabinet, listening to him and my mother argue about me. He accused me of irresponsibility. Lazy, fat, stupid. Those nights, more nights than I can count, I believed he might kill me in my sleep, that he would open my bedroom door and stare at me in hatred, his body framed by light. Then he would walk up to my bed and strangle me dead.

He was that strong; he was that angry.

I have, over the years, speculated about the source of his anger, but have never arrived at any satisfactory conclusions. His father died before I was born, so I don't know much about that particular relationship. I do know his parents refused to allow him to sign with the farm team for the Brooklyn Dodgers, dismissed his dream with ease. I could tell he hated his job: he did some secret thing with the propellents that drive missiles out of submarines into the sky. Women had cheated on him. Every day he inspected his garden, pinching sprouts that strayed out of the perfectly straight rows, reining in wayward vines with twine and stakes.



Around the time I started believing my father might have Alzheimer's, I started taking acid. Although I'm not convinced there was any profound connection between those two events, I'm sure my therapist thought otherwise. I was 22, living in North Carolina, and had dropped out of college, again, convinced I would be waiting tables and bartending for the rest of my life. The restaurant was tolerable: it provided insurance, cheap food, free booze, and enough money to pay for said therapist.

When I took acid, usually once or twice a month, I

always wanted to go outside, to wander, to look, look at that, to get up high, to climb a tree or sprawl on a rooftop and stare at the stars. I was convinced I could tell the difference between stars and the revolving blue, green, yellow lights of orbiting satellites. I made wishes and let the world leap into my bones.

The beach during summer was the best--nights full of shadows and warm breezes carrying wet smells. Once, watching the moon rise over the ocean, the light on the water made a path straight to me, followed me move for move. The ocean was purple, deliciously deep, the air thick and salty, and the sand was clay malleable, full of winking things. Later that night I sat on the beach with my legs angled out into the water. Dug down into the sand, lifted, let the cool ooze run through my fingers, over and over. I sat, grinning like a fool, all night.

I'm almost embarrassed to admit I never had particularly elaborate hallucinations--no melting walls or friendly conversations with Jesus. I never thought I could fly or anything, I just believed stuff like moonbeams following me. My tripping buddies seemed to freak themselves out pretty thoroughly though. Someone would inevitably come out of the bathroom, clutch my arm with both hands and shudder, "Don't, under any circumstances, look in the

mirror." They were afraid of their own eyes, the dilated pupils' reflections like a hall of mirrors, getting lost in a scary funhouse. I only had one rule: at some point, check in at home base--the rented condo, the borrowed cottage, the party. We all agreed: Don't get lost, don't wander too far.



I was walking down the hall, and Mom and Dad were leaning into each other, their foreheads touching. They looked up at me and opened their arms, and as I walked to them, my father gently took my face in both of his hands and patted my cheek, "You are a good kid. I love you." As I bowed my head, I realized that this was the first time my father had touched me and it didn't hurt. It was the fall of 1990; I was 28 years old.

The cynical part of me wonders if, when he touched me so sweetly, he even knew who I was. Probably just the disease talking. If I was willing to write off his violence to Alzheimer's, it seems that logic demands I write this off too. But I don't want to believe it was just the disease. And so I choose, today at least, to believe it was him.

But I wonder if his disease gave a bizarre gift, made it possible for him to say and do those things. I wonder whether it is stripping away the layers, revealing his core, what he really feels, what he's always felt. Or perhaps he

has no core, no essential substance, only a collection of nerves and synapses and electrical impulses, the lights of a New York high-rise, dimming, fading, finally blinking out.

My father said those sweet words to me right after I finally got my bachelor's degree from North Carolina State. I was six months away from moving to Colorado to start work on a master's degree in philosophy. Moving to Colorado also gave me a great excuse to only visit my parents once a year--West Virginia was too far away. I liked having the Great Plains and the Mississippi River between me and my family. Two weeks of that craziness a year was all I could take.



Christmas, 1992.

My father walks toward me down the hall, his right hand bent back, lightly running his fingers along the smooth, white wall. His slippers scuff along the red oak floor, and he looks up at me, cocking his head.

"Now, who are you?" he asks, dropping his hand to his side.

"I'm Sandy, your daughter," I say, nodding slowly.

He stares, squints. His voice so quiet, "But who am I?"

"You're my Papa, you're Woody Woodson."

He slumps, and I gather him in like a child.

Christmas, 1993.

Furred with sleep, I shuffle down the hall toward the kitchen. As I pass the open door to my mother's bedroom, I see the bedside lamp still lit and my father crammed in the twin bed with her. He always drifts toward light, like cigarette smoke. A few feet farther down the hall I sidestep one of the wrought iron kitchen chairs, then another. In the kitchen, the footstool from the living room sits stranded in the middle of the floor. I try to imagine how he managed to move that furniture so quietly.

Christmas, 1994.

Small sounds drag me out of sleep; a human figure looms, lit from behind. It's Dad. I can't tell what he's doing; he's standing at the dresser with his back to me, wearing a sky blue dress shirt and striped boxers. Maybe if I pretend like I'm asleep he'll go away, but I'm afraid he'll mistake me for his wife. Yesterday he came up and kissed the back of my neck.

I reach over and turn on the lamp. Startled, he turns to me, and I ask, "Whatcha doing there, Papa Bear?" Silent, he turns back to the dresser, and adjusts the doily draped along its top. Up and down, sideways, he uses his fingertips to stretch the edges, over and over again. Certain he is oblivious to my presence, I turn off the light and watch his hands, floating.



A couple of years ago I was in the middle of teaching my Intro to Philosophy students the joys of William James. After grinding through George Berkeley, working with James is pure joy. A philosopher who can write, thank God. Anyway, a student sitting in the front row asked me a question, and in the middle of my answer, I forgot what I was talking about, completely lost it. My voice trailed off, and I looked to the chalkboard for help. Scrambling, the only thing I could think to do was resume my lecture. And so I did. But I still have no idea if I answered that student's question, or even completed the sentence I started.

Now, if I forget things because of the acid, that's okay. Relatively speaking.

But I've heard Alzheimer's forgetting is not regular forgetting; things aren't hazy or ill-formed or on the tip of your tongue. It isn't like you lose the car keys and then have to retrace your steps. It's just gone; the slate is wiped clean. So I thought, remember this day Sandy. Because if you get it, you'll know when it started: November 1995.

Of course I know people forget things all the time, and when I start whining about this particular fear, someone always tries to comfort me with, "Oh, I'm totally forgetful," or "I'm horrible with names," or whatever. I'm

just not sure I'll know when I stop being like them and start being like him.

My family often speculates about when Dad's Alzheimer's started. I remember him acting weird when I was a senior in high school: I'd come home from school and he'd be sitting, brooding in the silent, darkening house. But he might have been in a funky mood; I think he and my mother were fighting. My mother thinks it really started a couple of years after that, right around when he retired.

I've read that Alzheimer's can last up to twenty-five years. I do the math: he retired in 1982, so he's been sick for around fourteen years. So our worst case scenario is eleven more.

No doubt about it: if there is a God, He is a Shit.

I've read a good bit about Alzheimer's over the years, but not so much really, mainly because it gets too depressing. I remember the first line of the first pamphlet I ever had sent to me: "Alzheimer's Disease is a degenerative brain disorder that is 100% fatal." After I read that line, I tossed the pamphlet into the trash--didn't seem like there was much left to say.

But I still pick up the articles now and again--can't seem to help myself--and this is what they say: Alzheimer's strikes far more men than women; women who bear children

with Down's Syndrome often get it; fraternal twins rarely get it. It might be skipping generations. And then there are those crazy nuns over in Minnesota who all seem to live to be 100 and never get it. The trick, they earnestly, sweetly believe, is to stay "mentally active." So I bought a "Teach Yourself Hindi" book, and I occasionally try to write with my left hand. Maybe violin lessons would help.

I also found out there's a genetic test for Alzheimer's Disease, and I periodically toy with having it done. It's called Apolipoprotein E (APOE) genotyping, and when I read articles about it, I wish I had paid a lot more attention in my biology courses. But this is what I understand: APOE has something to do with transporting cholesterol, and performs a largely unknown function in the brain. It is on the long arm of chromosome 19 and has some variations, numbered one through four. It's in plasma, so you can find out if you have the genotype with a blood test. Turns out up to 99% of test groups who had Alzheimer's also had APOE-4, so some scientists are all excited. Other folks are a bit more subdued--apparently, pretty much everyone who has Alzheimer's has APOE-4, but only around half of those people who have APOE-4 get Alzheimer's.

So, I think about having this test done, just to put my mind at ease, which of course would only be the case if it

turns out that I have no APOE-4 skulking around on my chromosome numbered 19. But if I don't have it, I do believe I might give up smoking, and maybe I'd even start an aerobics class or some other healthy shit. I bet, at least, that forgetting a student's question wouldn't make me feel like throwing up. Maybe I could stop looking at my father and envisioning my own death. But the problem. The problem, obviously, is if they find that I do have APOE-4.

On the most pragmatic level, I doubt insurance companies would ever cover me again, and I'm pretty sure there aren't any such things as anonymous Alzheimer's testing centers. A scarier problem would be whether to tell my mother. I like to think I'd be noble, hope she died before I manifested any symptoms, but I don't know how I could possibly keep from telling her, seeking comfort from her. Of all the things I imagine, I can't imagine telling her that I'm going to die like that. And if I have that gene, I'm not sure I could, in good conscience, have children: what if I gave it to them? Would I be coherent enough, long enough, to raise them? And of course I wonder what it would be like, the disease itself. I wonder if I would know it was coming on, whether I could hold onto my mind long enough to kill myself. I worry I would wait too long. I worry I'd do it too soon.



From November 1995 through February 1996, my father was in Frostburg Village, a nursing home in Maryland. He sat, day after day, in a chair in the hall trying to shake people's hands as they walked by. This gesture appeared sweet, or at least social, but unfortunately when he got hold of someone's hand, he'd squeeze as hard as he could, and he was still amazingly strong. He would refuse to let go, sometimes jerking his hand down, trying to pull you over. One day he backhanded a little old lady; she crumpled in a heap on the green, tile floor.

He was in the nursing home because he'd finally scared my mother. They were in the kitchen one night cleaning up after dinner, and Mom turned from the sink to find him ready to bash her head in with a huge crystal ashtray. She yelled "Woody!" in that mother voice, and then she walked to the phone and dialed 911. An ambulance came and took him to the hospital; three days later he left the hospital for Frostburg Village.

It made my mother crazy, being away from him. It didn't help that the nursing home called almost daily reciting a list of his violent behaviors. Obviously, they were trying to cover their asses for the day when they would throw him out; it was only a matter of time; you can't have people

slapping little old ladies around. I think she partly believed he was behaving so badly because she wasn't there and he was scared. I know she was embarrassed, even though she knew, we all knew, that most Alzheimer's patients get violent.

But more than that, she couldn't stand that no one's voice carried love to him, that no one in that place had a familiar touch. His t-shirts were getting grey from being washed with colors, and no one seemed to care that he liked cream in his hot tea. The attendants who shaved him nicked his chin, somehow missing entire swaths of stubble. His hair went uncombed, and no one took the time to help him put his glasses on.

By the time he went into Frostburg Village though, my mother was worn, emptied by chain-smoking, adrenalin, and depression. Every time she thought that it couldn't get worse, it did. And there were the numbing moments of his recognition, his gratitude, his tears. Guiltily, she wished that he would descend, finally, to the place where he would never again recognize her or their house, never again be happy to see her. Then it wouldn't matter where he was.

Once, when Ronald Reagan was still president, she turned to me and said, "Reagan has Alzheimer's. You know how I know? It's the way Nancy acts. I can tell; she's

protecting him just like I protect Woody. I see the look in her eyes."



Christmas, 1995.

Warily, I watch the "Walking Guy" endlessly pace the pattern of the carpet up and down the central hall the psychiatric ward. I'm watching him through the reinforced window, waiting to be let in so I can visit Dad for a couple of hours. The Frostburg Village psychiatrist has sent him here to evaluate his medications, trying to figure out why he's getting so violent.

The nurses have him secure in a chair with a stainless steel tray locked across the arms. His white head is bowed; he needs a shave. He rearranges a thin, pink washcloth on the tray, gently pulling the edges out and away with his index finger. The washcloth is stained with his blood. There is a cut on his arm, his hands are bruised, and I make out four purple fingerprints on his upper arm. No nurse or aid seems able to explain how any of these things happened.

I rub lotion onto his hands, his feet. As I reach up to his calves, I discover that his sweatpants are wet and cold. God only knows how long he sat there, fiddling with that washcloth while his piss turned to ice.



On acid, sometimes I'd wander out into the night, batting at mosquitoes and smearing their blood, my blood, down my cheek with sticky clarity. Sometimes, I'd want to go home. I wanted to go home where it's safe and warm and I can take a shower and get all this stuff off me. "Ride the wave," I'd say, trying to find something to distract myself. I'd look at my watch and realize that I still had hours of this, fucking hours, and that I'd better chill out, because this is the wave, and it is not stopping.

I remember being hazy, lost in time, walking around my neighborhood. I wander past an enormous, evil looking house set back in live oak trees, haunted for sure. It is surrounded by a tattered picket fence, paint peeling, some of the points broken off, slats missing, swooping out into the sidewalk like the rope of a boxing ring. On one of those spikes is a carousel horse impaled through the neck, ghostly white with a cadaver's smile. Startles me, then delights me, then horrifies me and I run, my glasses bouncing on my face, my feet crashing on the uneven sidewalk.

Stumbling, almost crying, home. Heat in waves billowing, faces enormous, leering, laughing, staring. I don't recognize these people, but they don't seem alarmed by my presence so I guess I belong here. "Did you see, I just saw..." slips off my tongue, but the faces don't seem to

understand what I'm saying. They turn away, their mouths gaping black.

I feel like crying. I want these people out of my house, and I want everything to be quiet.

I stumble back outside, sit on my porch steps, rub my face. I rest my chin on my hands and close my eyes, but they jump back open. Too many noises, too much going on for my brain to ignore. I sigh. I've done this enough times to know the ending is a long way off. But it will end; I know that too.



I remember. It's so hard, remembering things, trying to keep things straight. So simple, it would seem, to remember. But it's not; things get all squishy and garbled. Days bleed into one another, one, one, one, all.

When he still walked, my father looked like this: stooped, with a hump high on his back. His hair is pure white, thick, aggressively straight. His eyes are brown, cow brown, slightly bloodshot, with the whites a little yellowish. His eyes give him away, they tell some unclear story: pissed off, but not sure, then fading, resting on a straight high-backed chair. He sometimes sleeps with his eyes open--not wide open and staring, but open enough to see the brown crescent, waning. His skin is like tissue paper,

speckled, unevenly applied to his bones. His feet swell, the skin thicker, stretched so tight they seem ready to explode, a huge blister, water seeping. His hand catches the corner of a counter, the skin peels back blood welling. Bandages do not stay put. He is bored. He picks.

Then he forgot how to lock his knees. Learning how to lock your knees, my mother tells me, is the most important element of a baby's progression from crawling to walking. So once he forgot how to do that, his legs bent at the knees like reeds. He can no longer walk; he cannot stand.

So the boxy living room was gradually emptied of normal things, replaced with hospital things. The piano was angled into the dining room; a hospital bed now extends out from beneath the picture window. He drinks this stuff called "Go Lightly" which turns his shit into liquid that trickles all day. He lies on his back and stares at the ceiling; they tell me he's slipping in and out of a "light" coma. He seems to have lost control over his right side--the doctors think perhaps he's had a stroke. Pillows are tucked around his body to keep his arms away from the steel railing. He mumbles sometimes, frowning. His form is a murmur under the sheets. Sometimes, now, he forgets to swallow.

My mother told me that dying of thirst is good way to go--some sort of euphoria kicks in, and you die dreaming. I

imagine my father dreams of lumbering through the hills of Mineral County, West Virginia, his Winchester leaning comfortably on his shoulder. He is strong and at home in these hills; he walks for miles. The sun glows through the leaves of the maples. Twigs snap lightly under his feet. He knows the name of every moss, every tree, every bird. He pauses and nods at the song of a chickadee. In his dream, he is alone, unshaven.

He grins. My mother coos, "Hello there, ol' feller."



Christmas, 1996.

The day after I drive in from the Rocky Mountains my mother comes down with the flu, goes to bed and stays there. In fact, everybody else in West Virginia seems to be sick too. In a way it's a relief; it gives me concrete things to do.

Dad gets sick too, and the Home Health Aids who come every weekday are a little worried: he's running a fever, and if he gets a bunch of crap in his lungs he might get pneumonia, serious shit for the bedridden. They tell me to move him around, even though it obviously hurts. Pain, they tell me, is good; it makes him breathe deeply. Lift his legs, bend the knees. Turn him, clean out the blisters on his heels, but watch his mouth: he bites.

I raise the back of the hospital bed so I can feed him his dinner of blended soup and a dish of applesauce. Sprite to drink out of a bendy straw. I lay the cotton bib on his chest, pull up a chair beside his bed. His face is smooth and loose; his right pupil seems pulled by gravity to the outside corner of his eye. As far as I can tell, his eyes never close now.

I touch the spoon to his lower lip, and he opens his mouth. As I slip the spoon in, his eyebrows rise, like he's surprised, and he closes his lips over the soup. "There you go Papa, there you go."

I switch between spoonfuls of soup and applesauce, mixing in one of his pills every now and again. He gets pain pills, anti-psychotics, anti-depressants, and now antibiotics. I am silent, only speaking to murmur apologies when I make the bite too big or if my hand shakes and soup drips onto his chin. We go slow. I use the bib to wipe the corner of his mouth, rest my hand on his forehead, smooth back his hair. The other day he smiled when I did that.

The last bit of applesauce is stained pink by an anti-psychotic, and as I pull the spoon out, I can see the bite in his mouth, unchewed, not swallowed. I touch the spoon to his lips, trying to get the motion going again, but he doesn't respond. I'm scared he might breath it in and choke,

or that a chemical in the dissolving pill might burn his mouth. Although I know better, I plead with him: "Come on Papa, finish this last bite."

He stares up at the ceiling as the pink stain spreads over his tongue. While I watch, the applesauce starts hardening along the edges, dried by his breath. I think about trying to scrape the goo out with the spoon, but know I'd just end up spreading the stuff around, make it worse, and maybe get a nice nip for my troubles. I decide to leave him alone.

Later that night I hear him coughing, choking. It's a wet cough, and for a minute I think applesauce. But this isn't a food choke, it's the flu and it's thick. I know he can't breathe deeply enough to dislodge anything, and he doesn't have the control to sit up.

I sit with my book open in my lap knowing if I don't go sit him up, he is going to die.

I imagine a form in the fetal position in a nursing home, face sagging, alone. An arm hangs over the side of the bed, all bone and vein. I think of him like that, lying there for maybe another decade. Some orderly will shave him, wipe his ass. I think of how it must feel to have been lost for years in hallucinations, how it would feel to not know they're going to end, how his eyes never close.

I also think about my whole adult life spent feeling guilty for not being here and knowing that if I were here I'd lose my mind. And about how my mother has given this stubborn sonofabitch everything, and how she's going to die soon if this doesn't stop.

Mom will never have to know. I'll say I was asleep, I didn't hear anything. I can already hear, "It really is a blessing."

I listen to him gasping for air, phlegm gurgling. It seems loud, impossibly loud, and it echoes through the house. Why can't he just give up? I listen for my mother's voice asking me to go check on him, but when I concentrate, I hear only her snoring. This is going to be all mine.

I shut my book. He's still gasping, and suddenly it's too awful, too violent. I scurry down the hall, half-way hoping that in the 30 seconds it will take me to get there it will be over, scared shitless to think it might be.

As I round the corner into the living room, he's nodding and frowning, still choking, still trying. For some reason, it doesn't seem so loud in here; the ridges of his blankets quietly absorb the light from the Christmas tree. I slowly pick up the controls to the hospital bed and raise him to a sitting position, then pull him forward to my shoulder and pat his back. He swallows and breathes, that

fast its over, and I ease him back. I smooth his hair and run my finger along the stubble on his jaw.

I am a coward; I want it to be easy. I want him to die dreaming.

Snapdragon

I was in the mall, looking for something to wear to the funeral. I was vaguely embarrassed because I didn't feel particularly sad; I thought I should feel more bereft, at least look a little wild-eyed. I told the sales lady I had a funeral to go to, but I didn't mention that the person wasn't dead yet, or that he was my father.

I was shopping early so when the news came I wouldn't have to be in the florescent lights of a department store, talking to clerks and worrying whether my credit card would go through. I thought I needed a skirt, not pants. Something to wear again, she suggested. I nodded.

Over the last three years I'd had a number of phone calls running thus: "If you want to see your father alive again, you'd better get on a plane right now." First it was the kidney stones, then his gall bladder--any treatment that includes an anesthetic wreaks havoc with Alzheimer's. Then he had the stroke. But I never really believed any of the barely controlled voices. My family runs to melodrama, and my father, I thought, was far too stubborn to die.

In the past two weeks, though, I'd been the one calling, every day, listening to my mother's listless voice, her silence and breath. She told me he could no longer swallow any food. She'd said no to a feeding tube, no heroic measures.

He'd had no food in 11 days, and only the water from sponges used to moisten the inside of his mouth. Hospice was coming every day, giving him baths and morphine. I'd started sleeping on my couch so I wouldn't miss the phone call, started wincing when the phone did ring.

I couldn't stand the waiting; I booked a flight to West Virginia.

I get there on Monday, February 17. My cousin Pam and her husband Mike meet me at the tiny pre-fab airport in Ridgeley. Pam tells me my Mom is at home, which I translate as, "She didn't come here because she's afraid to leave the house, afraid she'll miss it." I pop another Valium.

We arrive at the house and I am amazed at how clean everything is. It smells like bleach and cigarette smoke. I expected disarray, chaos, dirty dishes at least. Something to indicate emergency. Strange to find order. I set my bags down in the kitchen, and Mike puts his arm around my shoulders. We walk slowly toward the living room and I try to brace myself.

Although I know the facts, was here only a month ago, I'm shocked at how thin my father is. His nose is bone, razor thin. I didn't know that after a body eats away the fat and muscle, it goes for cartilage. His cheeks are hollow, the bones almost breaking the skin. His head is all skull; he looks dead already.

My mother is thinner too, a good 15 pounds thinner, I'd guess. She sits on a chair next to him, reaching through the bars of the hospital bed, caressing his hand. She looks at me, sighs, and goes back to stroking his knuckles.

I walk to the bed and kiss his forehead. "Hey there Papa." He blinks, and all my plans for being brave disintegrate.

Something of him is still there.

I turn away, start back towards the kitchen. I wave Mike away, "I'm fine. I'm just going to smoke a cigarette and then I'll be back. I don't want him to see me cry."

I press my palms to the table and swear this will be the only time, the only fucking time, I'm going to be this weak.

Pam and Mike leave, and I nod promises to call if anything happens. I walk back into the living room and find Mom where I left her, now leaning over the rails of the hospital bed, smoothing his hair, looking into space.

I go to her, put my arm around her shrinking shoulders and say, "Go on back to bed, Mom. I'll stay up with him."

But she has some things to tell me before she goes. She tells me how she occasionally tries to close his eyes, but they drift back open. It's driving her crazy, she wants him to rest, to sleep. He hasn't closed his eyes in weeks. I look at his face, and the pupils look a little dilated, the irises bluish, newborn. I wonder if he's afraid to close them, if he's afraid of the dark. I wonder if he's afraid to go to sleep and never wake up.

She tells me how one of his legs will be ice cold and the other burning hot. How the doctor told her that giving him any water at all--even moistening his mouth with the sponge--really only makes him thirsty. So she had to stop doing that. She doesn't think he's in any pain, but of course it's impossible to know.

Her voice trails off, and I say again, "Mom. Go to bed. It's only 8 o'clock for me--I'm still on Mountain Time. I'm wide awake."

She gently pulls my face down and kisses my forehead. "I can't mourn his death. I mourn his life," she says, and slips back into the darkness of the hall.

I pace the room, think about turning off the lamps so maybe he can get some sleep. But I don't want him to be

scared; no staring into the black. He'll have plenty of that soon enough.

Enough, I think, *enough*.

I rest my cheek on the edge of his blankets and watch the digital clock on the cable station mark the time, shake my head at the Muzak grating out of the set. He's breathing like he's run a marathon: deep, fast pants. And then nothing. I watch the clock, count off 30 seconds. I decide I'll worry at a minute; I calculate 60 seconds, that the clock will read 10:34: 45. At 10:34: 45 I raise my head and he breathes, pants. We start again. Panting for 3 or 4 minutes, then the silence where I hold my breath too, do some quick addition and wait.

I wonder why people think death could be a decision, that a person can wait for the right time, for permission, for one last look. I wonder why people need to think that. If death was a decision, suicide would be easy, clean. If death was a decision, I imagine my father would have died long, long ago. But the body takes over, the mechanism grinds, grasps on.

This is my chance, and I know it, to tell him the things I've always wanted to, to get right with him. I've got him all to myself, and we've got all night.

I quietly tell him I live in Montana now, and how I see

bald eagles. I tell him about the house I dream of building. It will be solar powered, set into a mountainside. Lots of glass and a porch that runs the length of the house. And flowers, and I wish I'd listened a little more when you made me work in the yard. I know you tried. I'm stubborn.

I'm still in school--I know--but I'm learning to be a writer and I've finally found what I want to do. It's amazing.

I tell him about the little white bugs that infested my tomatoes last summer.

I can't bring myself to lie--for some reason I imagine that something about being close to death heightens abilities to detect lies--so I don't say he was a great father. It seems like some sort of sin to lie to a dying man. But I do say I know he did his best, and I turned out okay. I can take care of myself, and you shouldn't worry about that. And Montana is beautiful. I wish you could've seen it.

We pass the night, my listening to his breathing and watching the clock, him staring at the ceiling. Sometimes I rub his hand and try not to cry.

My mother wanders back into the living room around seven the next morning. I've been dozing on the couch, and she's still wearing a flannel nightgown. It's her turn.

Back in the master bedroom I vaguely register the screen door slamming, women's voices, the phone ringing. I wait for footsteps and the knock on the door, but it doesn't come, so I let the hum of voices lull me to sleep.

Four hours later, I drag my suitcases back to the bedroom, take a shower and join various relatives leaning on kitchen counters. It's quiet, even with all these people, and it feels like the time I was an extra in the movie Bull Durham: we're all pretending it's springtime but it's really winter. We extras sit in the stands for hours while people scurry around the field. Then the cameras are on and we're supposed to clap but not really; we're supposed to make the clapping motion without our hands meeting. You have to slow things down a bit when things aren't real, pay attention to every little motion, and you have to believe each wave through the air is being noticed, recorded.

The next day my oldest sister Judy drives in from Raleigh. She's his daughter from a previous marriage, the most like him: impatient, a sometimes cruel sense of humor, a big laugh. Technically she's my half-sister, but she's lived with us since I was two, so she's never seemed like anything but my sister. My other sister Diane is "half" too, and again she's been around since I was born; she's my mother's daughter from another marriage. But my half-brother

Johnny (from my father's first marriage) was 21 when I was born and never lived with us. He feels more like a distant uncle. Judy and I are the ones who tried hardest to make Dad love us; Diane and Johnny won't come here until he's dead.

I doze, sitting with my head leaning against blankets, and Judy comes out to spell me at around 2:30 AM. I go back to a bed, tell Judy that his breathing seems slower, shallower.

Around 4:15 Judy knocks on the bedroom door, says, "You'd better get up."

"Okay, I'm coming, I'm coming."

I hear another discrete knock down the hall, Judy's voice.

She and I stand on one side of his bed, my mother on the other. Judy is closer to his head. My father's breathing is changing, slowing, getting more even.

Judy rubs his upper arm, crying, tells him to let go, let go, it's okay, just let go. We'll all see other in the blink of an eye. Just let go.

She rubs his arm too hard; Dad winces; Judy cries harder, apologizing.

Leave him alone, I think, and I think about telling her to just shut up and let the poor bastard die in peace. I let that fantasy roll through my mind as my mother stands across

the bed, smoothing his hair, staring out the window, tears slowly, slowly rolling. The sky is lighter, but it's misty, and I look out the window too, at this place he loves, loved, and hope he knows that he's exactly where he's always wanted to be.

The sun is getting close to the horizon, and it feels like watching him die is the most important thing I've ever done and it's not as gruesome as I thought it would be. Fog blankets the trees, and I hope he understands that's just how Judy is and maybe this one time he could just be a nice guy. And it looks cold outside today, the cold will snap my nose later on. February sun, weak, won't get very high in the sky.

I caress his hand, and there is a sweet smell to his breath now. I breathe deep to try and figure out if I'm right, and it's there, like old apples, and I breathe death deep into my lungs and hold it there, trying to taste it.

I touch his poor old hand, his right hand, or really the ends of his fingers, his fingernails, trying to comfort him, but he doesn't look scared or anything. I wish Judy would shut up, she's really working herself up into a state, but I can't bring myself to say anything. I wonder if he's scared. Maybe he's annoyed with Judy, but that's got to be better than knowing that this is it, thinking just one more

breath, just one more, and I'm suddenly relieved for Judy's chatter, how it drowns out the sound of his dying.

I was touching him when he took his last breath.

We waited and waited, watched his chest, fluttered our hands above him, touching but not believing.

He died at 6 AM on February 20, 1997. A Thursday.



Movies don't prepare you for death, they don't show how unpeaceful it is, how the body struggles and persists. They don't really tell you how to close the eyes--in a movie someone solemnly brushes the palm of their hands from forehead to cheekbones and it's done. But in real life they don't stay closed. They also don't show how to close someone's mouth, how stubborn some parts of the body get when dying is done. They don't tell you about the horror of failing to do that one last thing for someone you love.

It's done now, it's over, I keep telling myself. I half-expect his chest to rise again and it occurs to me that there are so many things I don't know how to do.

My mother gives me a list of phone numbers; I'm in charge of making the phone calls. I'm supposed to call his brothers, Diane and Johnny, cousins. The funeral home. My mother tells me to start at the top of the list. I rehearse what I'll say, think about writing down a script: "Hey 'X',

it's Sandy. Yeah. He's gone." Too blunt. He's dead sounds awful, and I wonder if I'll be making any sense at all.

I wait a half hour before I make any phone calls, let the quiet settle through the house. I know we need to start this, but I don't want the quiet to end, for him to leave our house. And I still don't know what I'm going to say, can't imagine any words, refuse the melodrama but don't know how to get around it. Finally I call my cousin Pam. It's not quite 6:45, but she picks up the phone on the second ring.

"Pam, it's Sandy."

"Is he gone?"

"Yeah. He is."

"I'll be right there."

I start a pot of coffee and stare at the hills.

I think about calling the funeral home--Scarpelli's--it's where everyone in our family goes--but decide to wait a while. I decide, in fact, to let Pam call everybody else.

I drink some coffee and wait for her to get there. I remind myself to be careful with hot liquids.

Pam arrives, and Judy and Mom wander off. Pam and I have agreed that he will not leave this house naked. He never appeared in public without a t-shirt under his shirts even once in his life, and he's sure as hell not going to leave this house without drawers on.

Cigarette dangling off her lip like she's leaning over a pool table, Pam heaves Dad up and we pull the pajama top off him, pull a t-shirt over his head. I remind myself that I can't hurt him now. Can't hurt him now. She folds the covers down and pulls out his catheter, murmuring, "I always hated this goddamn thing."

I've got some boxers and Pam lifts his legs while I try to slide them on. His legs scissor around, so loose now but his bones are heavy, and we keep apologizing to him. No more resistance in him. They're on a little crooked, but we leave them alone. He's been messed with enough.

I don't know what I expect, but two young guys from Scarpelli's show up in a new white Caravan. They're wearing khakis, polyester polo shirts and loafers, and their hair is wet and freshly combed. They knock on the front door, and I hesitate to let them in. This is the end of something, everything. He's leaving here and he's never, ever coming back.

"He's right here," I nod, opening the door.

"Can we say good-bye one more time?"

"Sure, take your time," they smile sheepishly.

But the private part is over.

Judy runs into the kitchen, slumps to the floor, sobbing and damn near to hysteria. Mom floats back the hall.

I can't watch them take him away either, so I go out on the back porch, absently try to make smoke rings with the frosted, wet air.

The van swings around the driveway, passes the back porch, and the guys look surprised to see me, embarrassed like they've broken some rule. I smile at them, trying to reassure them. I resist the urge to wave goodbye to the van. Mom and Pam join me, and we all light cigarettes, drink some coffee. No talking. A neighbor, Thelda, plods up the driveway, goes to my mother and hugs her. I guess she saw the boys from Scarpelli's.

Pam and I try to remove the traces of his illness; people will be coming over. Pam calls the place where we rented the bed, the vacuum thing to suck the mucus out of his chest, and they promise to come out in the afternoon. We take all the towels, blankets, sheets, pillows and pillowcases, piled high in our arms, and stagger down into the basement and pile them randomly on the spare furniture. Washcloths, padding, gauze. Sick smells follow us.

I want to plant petunias at his grave, or maybe geraniums and marigolds. Snapdragons.

At ten, Mom, Judy, Pam and I go to Scarpelli's to make the arrangements. Mom is in slo-mo. She's taking some anti-anxiety pill, so she's blessedly calm. I'm out of Valium,

but I've sort of lost my faith in it anyway. It didn't seem to be doing very much.

We pick out a casket--oak buffed to a high shine, cream colored insides, with brass handles. The corners look like carved chair legs--round. It looks incredibly heavy. He'd like it, we're sure.

We also have to get a vault, which basically makes sure there's no seepage, which is nasty to contemplate but the law.

We have to get a jack hammer to dig the hole. It cost extra to break through the shale that stretches under the maples and grass of Springfield Hill Cemetery.

I have to make more arrangements later that afternoon, and am grateful to look younger than I am. They think that guy in there is my grandpa, so it's okay if I don't know what the hell I'm doing. I decide on a limo--none of us really need to be behind the wheel at this point--decide who rides where, what order the cars go, what flowers go where, try to remember how everybody's name is spelled for the obituary. I'm at a loss about whether to give Dad's glasses to the Lion's Club. Let's try five copies of the death certificate. We can always get more. We're still trying to get a minister. Two viewings, one afternoon, one evening.

I ask my mother if I can be a pall bearer, but she

shakes her head.

"Is it because I'm a girl? I'm strong, I bet I could do it."

She shakes her head again.

I don't understand why I want to do this; I'm afraid I would drop it, good god, but I want him to be proud of me. I want him to be proud of how strong I am.

"No, no, it's not that. In our family the children don't carry the casket. I've already asked Michael, Chuck, Jim and Bob." Cousins, nephews.

"And Greg and John." Sons-in-law. And then I want to fight with her about it, I can even picture me doing it--I'd need to use my right hand--my right side is much stronger than my left--and I want to, I just want to.

"Your father was a traditionalist," my mother says, looking straight in my eyes.

"Okay," I say, "Okay."

We have a hard time picking his suit.

"One of the only things your father ever said about dying was that he wanted to be buried in his Godfather Suit. You know, that gray pinstriped thing." She shakes her head.

I laugh, suddenly happy that they're still fighting.

I can't find a good tie to match. He probably hasn't worn that suit in well over a decade, and the only ties that

work at all are clip-ons and I think that's tacky but Mom overrides me, picks a red and gold one and his Hercules tie tack. I get him fresh underwear, a relatively new T-shirt, nice dark socks.

When I ask mom which shoes, she says, "Oh, you don't need shoes. You aren't buried in shoes."

I'm curious about whether this is another family thing or general practice, but I don't ask.

We're also having a hard time finding a minister; we are not a particularly religious family. For a while Mom and Dad went to the Baptist church up the road--my father was comforted by it--but then the buzz of voices and shifting bodies and hand-shaking got to be too much for him. He watched Sunday sermons on TV for a while after that, but then he lost interest in that, too.

Mom wants Billy Brakeall. She grew up with him and he knew Dad. We call all over town trying to track him down. My cousin Mike works in the post office, so Pam calls him and asks if there's been a hold put on Billy's mail. Maybe old Billy's in Bermuda. No holds. Judy went to school with his daughter; what's her married name?

People start showing up at the door with food. A neighbor with two shanks of ham. He'd just butchered it. Our pharmacist Iris arrives with hot mustard potato salad. Apple

pies, cherry pies appear. Cold cut plates. A bundt cake, icing drizzled down. Ribs. Vegetable soup and chili. I set the pies and pastries out on the dining room table, write down who brought what, and what dishes have to go back to whom.

We end up picking a minister from Frostburg--another cousin goes to his church and speaks highly of him. Reverend Neumark calls to set up a time to talk with the family so he can personalize the eulogy. We agree to meet at the funeral home after the first viewing.

We go to get flowers; Mom's getting the big drape--the spray--that hangs over the casket--and each of the kids must buy an arrangement. Judy offers to go in on something with me, but I resist. I have credit cards. The florist is running out of white snapdragons; I hear her order more for the Woodson funeral. Everyone seems to know he loved snapdragons. I wonder how everyone knows that.

I decide on a small arrangement of dried wheat stalks arranged like a peacock's tail, gathered in at the bottom with a yellow ribbon. It's small but it's right; at his core he was always a farmer, always wanted to plant his feet in the black soil of West Virginia and cast his eyes over the hills, shading his eyes. He wouldn't have grown wheat, I know. Don't care.

For the viewing we bring three pictures: a blown up newspaper clipping of him as "The Workhorse" when he was pitching in the mid-Atlantic league. It's a great sketch of him, the sassiest look in his eyes. Another picture of him when he was in the Navy, so young and beautiful. And a picture of him in the back yard boiling cypress knees, his pipe clinched in his jaw and grinning, pine trees poking up into the sky.

They've put some ridiculous pink crap on his lips, and it looks like they might have had to break his jaw to get it closed. I grit my teeth and shake my head. And his nose is still so skinny. But they've done a nice job altering the suit.

At first things are awkward with Rev. Neumark. He's a young man, a "brown man" as my mother would say. Brown hair and eyes, slight, almost mousy.

He starts by asking about our family. My Mom starts, "I'm Carolyn, actually his third wife." Johnny is the product of Madeline and Woody. Judy is the product of Woody and Jean. Diane the product of Carolyn and Jack. And Sandy is the product of Woody and Carolyn. The Reverend nods.

My mother starts off on her own, telling him Woody always said he wanted to leave the world a better place. She cries a bit. He was a hard man. Strict. We all agree he was

not a religious man, but he saw nature as holy. He loved classical music--Beethoven, Mozart. He also loved John Denver. He loved flowers and practical jokes. He loved beauty.

Johnny tells the Rev. Lawrence Neumark about my father's love of sports and his biggest regret: when he was a kid he caught a home run Babe Ruth hit. And then some adult took that baseball away from him.

I hear some great stories about my Dad during the viewings. Old men in tan polyester pants come in, bragging, "I could hit off him." Old ballplayers gathering together, arguing about his arm, about each other. They played ball with him here in town. Oh, way back. They touch my mother's elbow.

She seems compelled to tell everyone he died of Alzheimer's and how horrible a death it was. I grow almost embarrassed by this. "Amazing physical shape is not always a blessing," she says. Her eyes are glassy.

Some distant, ancient, bug-eyed cousins come up to my mother and me, and my Mom introduces us. "Sandy, this is Dolores and Hank. You don't remember them." Looking at Hank, she grasps my upper arm, pulls me in. "This is my youngest, can you believe it?"

"The last time we saw you, you were this high" he says,

motioning with his hand next to his thigh.

Dolores looks up into my face, her reptilian eyes slowly blinking. "Now how old are you?"

"34," I smile.

"Married?"

"Nope."

She looks me up and down. "Well why not? There's nothing wrong with you."

Hank grabs her arm, steers her away.

My family.

I knew that right out of college Dad coached basketball and baseball at Frostburg State. I thought he'd given it up because he needed to make more money, bent under the pressure to provide for a wife and kids. But my Uncle Don tells a story about how out some punk basketball player pulled a knife on Woody--even way back then--and after he slapped the knife out of the kid's hand, my father slapped the kid a good one. Apparently the administration was none too pleased, and Woody said the hell with this and walked.

I listen to the stories about what a good dancer he was, how he got a southern accent when he drank. I hear about snipe hunts. I hear about how my oldest sister sat in his lap as he read *Misty of Chincoteague* to her.

The next morning the Rev. Neumark does a fine job. I

sit between my brother and mother in the front row, almost dwarfed by a rococo velvet chair. Mom hands out Kleenex; we hold each other's hands.

After the memorial service, I give my brother and sisters and their children a stem of wheat and then tuck the rest in the casket with Dad. I also press a rock, a tiny pine cone and his favorite hat--a blue corduroy baseball hat from Colorado State University--next to him. And his tape measure. It's one of those metal ones, and he loved to run you through like a sword, the little canister swallowing the tape back up. He never tired of poking people with it; it made him smile, never failed to make him smile with glee. That goes in too. I'm a little nervous the funeral guys will see it and think they left it in the casket, so I tuck it way down.

The kids lean against the casket, just looking. The pall bearers stand at the back of the room, hands clasped in tight fists, shifting nervously. That casket is going to be heavy.

My mother rests her hand on his chest, then brushes her knuckles along his cheekbone. And then we all turn away, but as I swivel, I run my finger along the cuff of his jacket. I take my mother's arm and start walking to the limo. At the doorway I stop and look at him one more time, then walk into

the pale February sun.

Sitting on the back porch later that night, I knock back some George Dickel and chain smoke. I wonder if he had some special sense those last nights, the nights I sat with him telling him innocuous details, shielding him from who I am, from my anger. For all that anger, I didn't want to hurt him. I still don't.

I finger the obituary I cut out of the paper; it is exactly how my mother wanted it: spare and to the point. No emotional outpourings or references to a God he didn't really believe in. Just his job, his relatives, his death.

I keep wondering how I could have told him about the abortion, the drugs, the booze, wonder how many of those things I did to hurt him, and then fucked the whole plan by never telling him. I do think it would have hurt him to know how scared I was of him, scared always, even as he laid defenseless and panting. How I hated his eyes, how they always held contempt for me, or that's what I saw. How my stomach sinks when I think of his hands, those hands that slapped and grabbed and hurt me more than I understand, even now. How I don't have it in me to forgive him, just yet.

I can barely bring myself to think these things because maybe he can hear me. But I want to tell him: it's too late to fix anything that you broke all those years ago.

I was just a little kid, you son of a bitch, and now I spin in circles, whirl around dizzy, tired, tired, damaged beyond repair.

So tonight I decide to make a list of things he should have known:

I like college basketball, bourbon, snapdragons, clouds, sweet tea and standard transmissions. Larches are my new favorite kind of tree. I'm afraid of the dark and loud noises. I'm good at carving turkeys and I make a mean martini. Jay Williamson touched my breasts when I was in high school, I lived with a guy for two years, and now I make love to a woman. I drive a '79 Subaru and half the time I don't believe in God. I try to make my "W"s like his when I sign my name. I have perfect pitch. I worry about dying alone.

WOODSON

SHORT GAP, W.Va. -- Walter E. "Woody" Woodson, 77, of Short Gap, died Thursday, Feb. 20, 1997, at his residence.

Born July 24, 1919, in Springfield, he was the son of the late Walter E. Woodson Sr. and Margaret (Krause) Woodson.

Mr. Woodson was a retired employee of the Hercules, Corp. in Cumberland, Md. He was a U.S. Navy veteran of World War II.

Surviving are his wife, Carolyn A. (Kerns) Woodson; one son, John W. Woodson and wife Mary, Warren, Mich.; three daughters, Judy Woodson Bruhn and husband Greg, Raleigh, N.C., Diane L. Sinclair and husband John, Evans, Ga., and Sandra K. Woodson, Missoula, Mont.; two brothers, Frank E. Woodson and wife Janet, and J. Donald Woodson and wife

Jerry, all of Springfield; four grandsons, John W. Woodson, Daniel A. Sinclair, Nathan K. Sinclair, and George W. Bruhn; and special nieces Jennifer Biedka and Pamela Thomas.

Friends will be received at the Scarpelli Funeral Home, 108 Virginia Avenue, Cumberland, Friday from 2 to 4 and 7 to 9 p.m.

Services will be conducted at the funeral home Saturday at 11 a.m. with the Rev. Lawrence Neumark officiating.

Interment will be in Springfield Hill Cemetery.

Contributions can be made the Potomac Valley Hospital Home Health/Hospice Unit, Keyser, W.Va.